

Item #25: Wildlife Habitat Improvements

Evaluation Objectives: To evaluate wildlife habitat improvements.

Methods: Habitat improvement accomplishments for the 1998 - 2006 period are reviewed and compared to expected implementation rates.

Evaluation: Habitat improvements considered were directed at terrestrial wildlife species, but for accounting purposes are categorized as either wildlife or threatened and endangered species (TES) and as an acre or structure accomplishment. Wildlife accomplishments are generally directed at elk, deer, moose, waterfowl, etc; while TES accomplishments are directed at grizzly bears, gray wolf, bald eagle, loon, lynx, etc. Acre accomplishments, include treatments that occur over an area, may include burning, planting, seeding, slashing, etc; while structure treatments occur at a site and may include installation of gates or berms on roads, development of nesting platforms for loons, etc. Habitat treatments are funded through annual wildlife appropriations such as, Knutson-Vandenburg Act funding, state Sikes Act funding, and indirectly with other resource appropriated funds. Partnerships have occurred with the Montana Loon Society, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Hungry Horse Dam Mitigation program, Children for Wildlife, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Plum Creek Timber Company, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and numerous private individuals.

Table 25-1 displays accomplishments for years 1992-97. Table 25-2 displays accomplishments for years 1998-2007. Thousands of acres of security habitat have also been improved for large roaming wildlife species through the access standards for grizzly bear management subunits (Table 25-3). Much of these acres have been derived from road decommissioning and Table 25-4 displays miles of road decommissioned since 1995. In addition, since 1995 there are 349 fewer miles open to motorized traffic yearlong. Once a road is made available for non-motorized access studies show effectiveness of habitat increases dramatically for species such as elk and grizzly bear.

Table 25-1. Habitat Improvements for Wildlife 1992-1997

| | Wildlife | | TES | |
|--------|----------|-----------|------|-----------|
| YEAR | acre | structure | acre | structure |
| 1992 | 1069 | 20 | 250 | 24 |
| 1993 | 507 | 55 | 250 | 24 |
| 1994 | 340 | 53 | 360 | 20 |
| 1995 | 1168 | 26 | 390 | 23 |
| 1996 | 712 | 17 | 400 | 54 |
| 1997 | 1054 | 0 | 906 | 35 |
| Total | 4850 | 171 | 2556 | 180 |
| Ave/yr | 808 | 29 | 426 | 30 |

Table 25-2. Habitat Improvements for Wildlife 1998-2007

| YEAR | Wildlife | | TES | |
|--------|----------|-----------|-------|-----------|
| | acre | structure | acre | structure |
| 1998 | 1625 | 0 | 900 | 0 |
| 1999 | 3433 | 2 | 4000 | 20 |
| 2000 | 1360 | 12 | 3000 | 12 |
| 2001 | 1150 | 0 | 320 | 0 |
| 2002 | 1735 | 10 | 765 | 35 |
| 2003 | 1300 | 5 | 517 | 21 |
| 2004 | 400 | 0 | 3150 | 32 |
| 2005 | 100 | 0 | 2080 | 15 |
| 2006 | 1541 | 0 | 1865 | 3 |
| 2007 | 433 | 0 | 516 | 0 |
| totals | 13077 | 29 | 17113 | 138 |
| Ave/yr | 1308 | 3 | 1711 | 15 |

Table 25-3. Existing Grizzly Bear Security Core on the Flathead N. F.

| | 1995 | | 2007 | |
|--|---------------|--------|---------------|--------|
| | Acres of Core | % Core | Acres of Core | % Core |
| 70 GB Subunits | | | | |
| 2,223,677 ac (includes 16 mostly non-wilderness subunits (3 subunits with minor Forest ownership are not included) | 1,401,926 | 63 | 1,530,653 | 69 |

Table 25-4. Flathead N. F. Road Decommission Mileage since 1995.

| Year | Miles of Road | Cumulative |
|-------|---------------|------------|
| 1995 | 69.97 | |
| 1996 | 40.38 | 110.35 |
| 1997 | 28.40 | 138.75 |
| 1998 | 18.36 | 157.11 |
| 1999 | 109.20 | 266.31 |
| 2000 | 37.24 | 303.55 |
| 2001 | 1.25 | 304.80 |
| 2002 | 56.54 | 361.34 |
| 2003 | 36.43 | 397.77 |
| 2004 | 41.52 | 439.29 |
| 2005 | 28.09 | 467.38 |
| 2006 | 46.66 | 514.04 |
| 2007 | 42.09 | 556.14 |
| Total | 556.14 | |

The habitat improvement program is intended to help maintain habitat productivity, vegetation diversity, and help mitigate effects to wildlife or habitat from other Forest uses.

Accomplishments less than proposed in the Forest Plan or individual project decisions may result in lower forage production on big game winter ranges or reduced habitat effectiveness for many species due to inadequate access management or nesting structures. Analysis of total amount of habitat improvement acres is difficult because the acres may come directly from wildlife funding and/or indirectly from a combination of KV, state, or private conservation groups. The forest wildlife records are not always clear on which acres were tracked in the past. All in all, the number of habitat improvements for wildlife is well above the +/-200-300 acres estimated annual from the Forest Plan. Additional habitat diversity is created annually with wildfires and fire use situations.

Additional conversion of acres due to timber management, wildfire or fire use objectives may be of benefit for certain wildlife. These acres are not included here but are reported elsewhere.

Biologists help coordinate these other activities and potential benefits or mitigation measures by being on interdisciplinary teams, wildfire resource advisory and burned area emergency recovery teams.

Recommended Action: Habitat improvements are reported in the annual Fish, Wildlife and Rare Plant Report Database as improvements derived from wildlife and partnership funds.

Actions associated with integrated vegetation management projects, wildfires or prescriptive fire use could also be useful for wildlife and should be reviewed for habitat improvement values and reported accordingly.